Chapter 7
Gender Style Differences in Mediated Communication

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates gender differences in linguistic features of communication styles in the context of mixed public discussion groups in asynchronous, text-based CMC. The study evaluates gendered communication and language styles in situational contexts of CMC. A sample of 3000 messages from 30 Internet discussion groups was content analyzed. Results revealed gender differences in stylistic features used by discussion group participants and partially support the expectation that women’s online communication style is gendered. The data did not reveal an online communication style that significantly discriminated men’s communication. Findings point to the important role of gender enacted through language in the construction of social identity in the context of public discussion groups in CMC. Implications of this investigation and directions for the development of future research on gender in CMC are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) optimistically predicted democratizing effects of CMC in fostering equal participation and gender-free social equality. Anecdotal evidence of men posing as women, of women assuming pseudonymous identities, and of gender-switching in online social interaction appeared to support the potential liberating effects of anonymity in CMC. Gendered identity was thought of as either invisible or easily fungible in text-based CMC. The lack of physical (and visual) cues in text messages due to the isolation and anonymity of message senders can mask information on identity a message sender was unwilling to share (Barnes, 2003).

Herring (2000) argued that research on social interaction in CMC does not support this anonymity expectation. Her review of empirical research on gender in text-based CMC indicated that most
Gender Style Differences in Mediated Communication

Social interactants do not attempt disguising or masking gender, when it would be advantageous. Much of the research pointed to a tendency for online participants to display culturally-learned gender styles in their text messages (Herring, 2000). Gendered attributes of language styles in CMC are nearly the same as face-to-face (FTF) communication. This suggests that rather than biological differences culturally learned patterns of gendered communication behavior, and to some extent power and status hierarchies, are carried over to online social interaction (Mabry, 1998; Postmes et al., 1998; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1998). This explanation, however, does not address the appearance and persistence of binary gender. An important justification for gender research in CMC is to search for new explanations for positive social uses and functions binary gender might serve. This investigation examines gender differences in the linguistic styles of Internet discussion group members in an effort to support Herring’s explanation.

BACKGROUND

The social egalitarianism initially ascribed to the appropriation of computer-mediated communication has proved to be illusive. This expectation of social leveling was predicated on the theory that a loss of information in CMC, through a filtering out of social cues, would constrain the presence and impact of communicators (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Culnan & Markus, 1987). Walther and Parks (2002) noted the theory tacitly assumed that attenuating communication channel cues limits communication functions, whereas research indicates that communicators in mediated communication contexts are able to successfully extrapolate levels of intensity, affect, or social cohesion and identity using restricted social information.

A similar conclusion premises social identity/deindividuation [SIDE] theory (Lea & Spears, 1995; Spears & Lea, 1992, 1994; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998, 2000). The SIDE model recognizes that social contexts facilitated by the use of CMC provide social information. Research indicates participants use either their contextual sensitization or individual identity as anchors in drawing inferences about message intent and the implications of interaction in a mediated social space depending on the perceived strength of social norms attached to their behavior.

Social contexts constructed through CMC are quite diverse either because of the range of goals motivating the need for communicating or the type of communication constraints associated with the communication technology that is used. Therefore, it is not surprising that while research typically reveals gendered expressiveness in CMC contextual analyses of mediated communication seldom generate specific reproducible results of particular behavioral markers.

Low interaction contexts like web logs (blogs) have not produced marked differences in female and male writers except for differences in the affective tone of messages (Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Similar results have been observed in mediated contexts with higher interactive potential. Fox, et al. (2007) found that women’s instant messaging [IM] messages were more expressive but otherwise were quite similar to messages sent by men. Results of studies using online discussion groups and forums have painted a similar picture. Guiller and Durndell (2007) studied online discussion groups and found men were more likely to use authoritative and negative language, whereas women’s interaction employed a more positive style through the higher use of agreement, supportiveness, and a positive emotional tone. Women also appear more likely to employ graphical displays during online discussions. Witmer and Katzman (1997) observed that women in mediated discussion groups were more likely to use stylized graphical displays like emoticons and articons. Waseleski (2006) also found that women were more likely to use